Cherokee Life Just Before the Removal

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For more than 10,000 years, Cherokee people have called the Mountain region of North Carolina home. Three thousand years ago, these American Indians were living in permanent, organized towns—making pottery, hunting with bows and arrows, and growing plants like squash, sunflowers, and gourds. But by 1800, with more and more European settlers arriving in the area, the tribe had lost over three-fourths of its vast homeland through a series of treaties. Over three-fourths of its people had died from diseases like smallpox.

In 1838 the United States government forced most Cherokee throughout the southern Appalachian region to move west to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Some stayed because they owned land in their own names, while others hid in remote areas until the soldiers left, and a few walked back from Indian Territory. They became the great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers of the modern-day Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The tribe continues to live on a small part of its ancestral land known as the Qualla Boundary, in parts of Swain, Jackson, Cherokee, Graham, and Haywood counties. Little visible evidence remains on the landscape of antebellum Cherokee life just before and during the Removal to Indian Territory, a trip many people today know as the Trail of Tears. But in the town of Cherokee, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian uses archaeology, documents, oral traditions and mythology, and other evidence to piece together the story.

In the early antebellum period, which began around 1820, the Cherokee Nation was centered in northwest Georgia, where the town of New Echota served as the capital. New Echota included a council house, Supreme Court building, missionary's home, farmhouses, and a newspaper office with a printing press that published the *Cherokee Phoenix* in English and in the Cherokee language. Council minutes, court records, letters, and correspondence provide a lot of information about daily life, as do old copies of the newspaper. The Cherokee Nation included about 16,000 people divided into eight districts. It had a very organized government, justice system, and police force. Christian missionaries taught Cherokee children to read, write, and sing hymns in English. The Bible was being translated into the Indians' language. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1832 that the tribe represented a sovereign nation within the United States, with the right to govern itself.

Before Removal

In 1820 more than 7,000 Cherokee lived in present-day western North Carolina, most of them on the tribal lands, west of the Nantahala Mountains. Some had claimed land in their own names after the Treaty of 1819. This treaty allowed a Cherokee man or woman to own up to 640 acres. This was a difficult choice for Cherokee people—who traditionally believed that everyone

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shared the land—but some chose to claim land as a way to keep from being pushed out of the places their ancestors had lived for so long.

In the Great Smoky Mountains, Cherokee people lived along the rivers as they had always done. What they called the Middle Towns clustered along the Little Tennessee River beginning at its headwaters and going to the Nantahala Mountains—about 16 towns in 40 miles. The seven Out Towns stood along the Tuckaseegee, Oconaluftee, and Nantahala rivers, including the town of Nunayi, where the town of Cherokee is today. The Valley Towns followed the Valley River to its junction with the Hiwassee (at present-day Murphy, in Cherokee County). Several other towns were located in the Cheoah Valley.

Most Cherokee families in western North Carolina in the early 1830s were full-blooded, meaning that only a few people had married and had children with people from outside the tribe. About 12 Cherokee men owned plantations and enslaved African Americans; only 37 slaves were counted in the Cherokee Nation in western North Carolina. Most Cherokee lived on small farms. Even on their farms, everyone considered themselves part of a community. Every community had a council house where people gathered to hear the news, make decisions, and dance. Even when people had to move off tribal land, they kept their communities together. About 25 percent of the people could read and write the Cherokee language.

In 1835, in preparation for removing American Indians from their tribal lands, the United States government began studying them. They took a census; made maps and surveys of buildings, trails, and terrain; and sent soldiers to begin building forts in Cherokee country. The census of 1835 offers an incredible amount of information. Most Cherokee homesteads were the farms of a family that included parents and children, or an extended family of at least three generations. Each farm included an average of 14 acres of cultivated ground, most of it in cornfields but also including a vegetable garden. Families had apple trees, peach trees, and cherry trees. Most farms had a cabin, about 20 feet long and 14 feet wide, made of logs with the bark still on, wood shake roofs, packed dirt floors, and a fireplace. Outbuildings included corncribs, barns, stables, and sometimes a hothouse, the traditional *osi*. Families raised cows and hogs (ranging them in the woods), and raised horses for their use or to trade.

From federal records documenting the property that people sent to Indian Territory left behind ("spoilation claims"), we know that families owned dishes of pewter and china, as well as pottery made in the traditional Cherokee way. Families made baskets of rivercane and white oak, as they had for centuries. They raised almost everything they ate but also traded at area stores for blue and white china dishes, cloth, and ribbons. Archaeology of cabin sites from the period and store records confirm this information. Children learned how to do things from their parents. Boys went hunting and fishing with their fathers and learned how to make and use blowguns, bows, and arrows. They learned how to track and hunt animals. Girls helped their mothers on the farm and in the gardens, and went with them into the mountains to gather plants for food and medicine. They learned how to make baskets, pottery, and clothing.

The Trail of Tears and Beyond

Congress narrowly passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, forcing American Indian nations to trade their southern land (which would be resold to whites) for western land. Most Cherokee did

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not want to leave their homes. They organized national speaking tours; lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C.; petitions; and news-paper opinion articles. But President Andrew Jackson ignored even the 1832 Supreme Court decision that they were a sovereign nation. A few Cherokee signed the Treaty of New Echota (1835), ratified by one vote in Congress in 1836, and so they all had to leave.

In May 1838 U.S. Army troops and state militias began rounding up the Cherokee. The army had built stockades throughout the Cherokee Nation—North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama. These stockades were just pens, with nowhere to sleep, cook, or use the bathroom. Conditions were very bad. People got sick with whooping cough, measles, and dysentery. Groups did not begin the trip west until September and October. In the process of being rounded up, kept in stockades, and being marched to Oklahoma in cold weather, as many as 4,000 people died. A "roll," or census, taken in 1841 counted about 1,000 Cherokee remaining in the East. One was Junaluska, the hero of the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814, who had walked back from Oklahoma. Because of his service to the United States, the state of North Carolina gave him 336 acres near Robbinsville, in Graham County, where his gravesite is located today.

In the later antebellum years before the Civil War, some white men made fortunes in the Mountain region. They bought the former Cherokee lands for very little money and harvested timber, minerals, and plants. Nimrod Jarrett in the Nantahala area, for example, harvested tons of valuable ginseng. He employed Cherokee and white men, and used enslaved African American workers, to harvest and transport this crop. Laborers also cut timber and hauled it out of the mountains, built roads, and mined mica. For most Cherokee, life was less prosperous. Their legal status remained uncertain, but they did have a helper: William Holland Thomas. Tribal leader Yonaguska had adopted Thomas, a white man, when he was a young boy. Thomas had become a lawyer who spoke English and Cherokee fluently. He worked tirelessly in Raleigh and in Washington, D.C., to secure the legal rights of Cherokee living in North Carolina. Using money that the people had earned, he bought land for them and held it in his own name until the legal status of the Cherokee was determined, after the Civil War. Holland then returned the land to them, and the Cherokee created the tribal land of about 57,000 acres still held today as the Qualla Boundary. In 1839 Thomas and Yonaguska created seven Cherokee communities to help the people get reorganized. They were located near the Oconaluftee River (present-day Cherokee), Valley River (Andrews), and Cheoah River (Robbinsville).

The Cherokee continued to live self-sufficient lives, with cornfields, gardens, and orchards. They fished, hunted, and gathered wild plants, nuts, and berries. They ranged hogs and cows in the woods. They plowed with mules and oxen and kept a few horses. Plants and prayers were still used for medicine, and some continued making pots and baskets. New traditions like fiddle playing joined old ones like stickball and social and animal dances. People still met in council houses, and they passed on stories of the Removal and the old days to their children and grandchildren.

Most of today's towns and roads in western North Carolina were built over old Cherokee towns and roads. The town of Cherokee was built atop the community of Qualla, organized after Removal. Before that, in the same place, the town of Nunayi—built around a mound on the Oconaluftee—existed for thousands of years, according to archaeologists, and "what the old

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people told me." When we dig a little, we can rediscover and preserve the stories of the long-ago Cherokee.

**At the time of this article's publication, Dr. Barbara R. Duncan served as the education director at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian. She is a folklorist who has published several books about the Cherokee, including co-writing the award-winning* Cherokee Heritage Trails Guidebook *(UNC Press, 2003). For more information, access www.cherokeemuseum.org.*

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